The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan

Ikegami Eiko
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995

Reviewed by M. William Steele, International Christian University, Tokyo

This book is a sociological study of the changing roles played by the samurai class for nearly 700 years of Japanese history, from the Kamakura period up to the end of the nineteenth century. Ikegami Eiko, Associate Professor of Sociology at Yale University, is interested in values, particularly honor, and tries to poke holes in a number of established views of Japanese society. She is particularly dissatisfied with the notion that Japan is a consensus "group" society and points instead to a long-standing tradition of "heroic individualism" associated with the samurai. Moreover, her samurai do not meekly seek to preserve the status quo; they offer dynamic resistance to the establishment and emerge as sources of innovation.

In all, Ikegami attempts, in line with recent trends in Japanese historiography, to find indigenous origins of Japanese modernity. Her book is comparable to Robert Bellah's seminal book in rethinking Japan's pre-Western past: *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan* (first published by The Free Press, 1957). Whereas Bellah came up with a functional equivalent of a Protestant work ethic in Ishida Baigan's *shingaku*, Ikegami's "tamed" samurai of the Tokugawa period and their "honorific individualism" play a slightly more complex role.

On the one hand, "the refocusing of the culture of honor supplied an indigenous moral resource that was subsequently fully utilized for promoting organizational solidarity and efficacy during the later phases of national efforts to industrialize." On the other hand, the Tokugawa samurai retained an aggressive aspiration toward autonomy directly connected to their sense of dignity and individuality. Ikegami's thesis is to show that these two cultural themes—honor and dignity/control and change—"served as a source of cultural and intellectual creativity, during the Tokugawa as well as the Meiji and more modern periods" (p. 329).

The strength of Ikegami's book is her concern with historical change. When dealing with values, it is tempting to ascribe them to culture and it is doubly tempting to assume that culture does not change. Thus, there arose the argument that Japan has always been a group society in which values such as harmony and consensus are given priority. Ikegami rejects this facile view and traces tensions between individualist aspirations and normative standards of conformity throughout seven centuries of Japanese history. Her attempt to "historize" Japanese culture is to be applauded.

A major theme of the book is its look at the samurai contribution to the process of state formation in the Tokugawa period. Taking hints from Max Weber, Ikegami notes that the formation of a state hinges on the ability of the state to monopolize the use of legitimate violence—the state as "organized crime." Private resort to violence is considered illegitimate, whereas the state's use of violence (warfare/executions) is not. A new culture of honor emerged during the long peace of the Tokugawa era: honor that was less associated with violence and more with virtuous self-discipline; honor that was less personal and more organizational; honor that was less concerned with performance and more with status.

Ikegami defines this new construct as "honorific individualism" and it is here that she finds Japan's indigenous cultural resource for individualism and the means

which would allow/propel the individual to go against prevailing currents in society (p. 350).

Ikegami's thesis is interesting. The focus on the samurai's cultural evolution obviously has much to tell readers about the nature of honor, individuality, and selfhood in contemporary Japanese society. The samurai passion for independence and their painful attempt to reconcile it with a collective identity certainly resonates with a dilemma confronted by many modern Japanese. No wonder the samurai remains an important cultural symbol at the end of the twentieth century.

Ikegami's book is a work of historical sociology. It is important to keep this in mind as some readers, especially historians, may be surprised at her attempt to cover the evolution of samurai values in 300 pages. She is forced to remain on the surface; theory predominates over historical insight. Moreover, the texts are familiar: stories from the *Konjaku*, Confucian thought of Yamaga Sokō and Arai Hakuseki, stories by Saikaku, the tale of the forty-seven ronin, Hagakure and the cult of death, and so on. And she relies heavily on secondary literature. Some historians may even question her endeavor to use the past to explain the present. Ikegami wants to see how samurai values contributed to "the making of modern Japan."

This presupposes a meta-narrative that some may dispute. Why not understand samurai values in the context of their own day or some other non-linear format? These, of course, are criticisms by historians; sociologists and those unfamiliar with literature on the samurai, may draw very different conclusions. Taken on its own terms, as any book should be, *The Taming of the Samurai* is an important text for understanding the origins and transformation of cultural values informing self and society and how they may relate to the various tensions between individualism and collectivism in modern Japan.

Shapers of Japanese Buddhism

Kashiwahara Yusen and Sonoda Koyu, eds.
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viii, 379pp.

Reviewed by Paul L. Swanson,
Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nagoya

This handy volume contains twenty "major biographies" and seventy-five "brief biographies" of important figures in the history of Japanese Buddhism. It is a translation of a work originally published in Japanese, and the translators and editors are to be commended for producing a book that reads smoothly and successfully, providing basic information in an appealing fashion. Its usefulness is enhanced by the inclusion of many pages of photographs, maps, a chronological guide, glossary, list of primary sources ("documents"), suggested readings, and index.

The selection of who should "make the list" in such a work as this is a tricky matter. The twenty major biographies include the obvious choices such as Kūkai, Saichō, Hōnen, Shinran, Dōgen, Nichiren, and so forth, but also refreshingly include four modern figures: Shimaji Mokurai, Shaku Soen, Kiyozawa Manshi, and Suzuki Daisetz.

I was surprised to find that the collection did not open with Prince Shōtoku, with which most Japanese accounts would begin, but he is given sufficient treatment in the brief biographies. One might also wonder why Hakuin was relegated to a brief biography, while the lesser-known (and certainly less influential) Gessho (1813-1858) is given major attention.